

Strategic Perspectives on the Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

Tiago Alexandre Maurício

Researcher at Kyoto University and WSD-Handa Fellow at Pacific Forum, CSIS, where is developing a project on Japan's policy towards Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute. He is also a contributing analyst to Wikistrat, online consulting. He has an MA in War Studies from the King's College (London), having previously graduated from the Technical University of Lisbon.

Resumo

Perspetivas Estratégicas sobre a Disputa Sino-Japonesa em Torno das Ilhas Diaoyu/Senkaku

Nos últimos anos, mas particularmente nos últimos meses, testemunhamos uma crescente atenção mediática e académica dedicada à disputa entre o Japão e a República Popular da China no Mar da China Oriental. O grupo de ilhas e rochedos conhecido como Senkaku no Japão, e Diaoyu na China, tem assumido papel de relevo nos debates sobre a evolução do ambiente securitário na relação bilateral, assim como na região Ásia-Pacífico. Analisando a disputa, é de realçar não só as rápidas transformações a ocorrer tal ambiente securitário, mas também o potencial para erros afetarem o comportamento estratégico dos países da região. Existe, pois, um perigo real de se desenrolar um confronto militar, mesmo que limitado. Consequentemente, este trabalho analisa as características preponderantes do comportamento estratégico do Japão, no contexto da disputa ao tomar em consideração as várias dimensões da análise estratégica, as suas interligações, e as implicações geopolíticas e geoestratégicas resultantes.

Abstract

In recent years, but particularly in the last few months, we have seen growing media and scholarly attention focusing on the dispute between Japan and the People's Republic of China in the East China Sea. The group of islands and rocks known as Senkaku in Japan, and Diaoyu in China, has taken centre-stage in debates on the evolution of the security environment in bilateral relations, as well as in the Asia-Pacific region writ large. Looking at this dispute, one is struck not only by the rapid changes occurring in the said security environment, but also by potential mishaps besieging the strategic behaviour of all neighbouring states. There exists a real danger of a military conflict, however limited, occurring.

Consequently, this paper analyses the determinant features of Japan's strategic behaviour within the context of the dispute by taking into consideration the several dimensions of strategy, how they interconnect, and the resulting geostrategic and geopolitical implications.

In recent years, but particularly in the last few months, we have seen growing media and scholarly attention focusing on the dispute between Japan and the People's Republic of China (PRC/China) in the East China Sea. The group of islands and rocks known as Senkaku in Japan, and Diaoyu in China (Hagström, 2012: n1), has taken centre-stage in debates on the evolution of the security environment in bilateral relations, as well as in the Asia-Pacific region writ large.

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Unsurprisingly, the impact any major disruption to regional security stemming from clashes in or around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute is a matter of extreme importance. That a dispute over the said islands can provoke a grave deterioration of what has essentially been a peaceful, albeit often unstable, security environment is not merely the main proposition of this paper. It also serves as testimony of the relatively insufficient knowledge we have of the strategic implications of the dispute. Moreover, it also attests to the possibility of a military escalation between Japan and China. Concordantly, analyses on matters pertaining to the threat or use of military force in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute are forthcoming.

Since the dispute first came to the fore, in the late 1960s, there have been regular encounters between both countries' military and constabulary forces, but also among civilians, at sea and in the skies above. The rate of these encounters, as we will see later, has increased exponentially over the last years to become a nearly daily occurrence. Incidentally, some of these encounters have seldom resulted in more extensive flare-ups, which have in turn led to not unimportant crises in bilateral relations.

For Japan, this is a time of heightened tensions and grave anxiety regarding the future of the dispute. Consequently, it is important to look at the strategic predicament which underpins and pervades this country's actions and perceptions, with particular emphasis on issues concerning the threat or use of military force in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. In other words, this paper hopes to contribute to Japan's strategic debate on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and assist its analysis in Portugal.

There are two important caveats worth mentioning beforehand. First, the author does not subscribe to the view that an open, direct and calculated military conflict is likely or indeed inevitable, considering the larger ebb and flow of geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics in East Asia. Second, the Republic of

China (Taiwan) is also a claimant to the islands (which it calls Diaoyutai) and an important actor in the regional strategic balance. However, as neither China nor Japan recognise it a sovereign state, it is deliberately omitted from our analysis (Sun, 2012: 146-9).

With that in mind, the paper will proceed to address the following question: what are the determinant features of Japan's strategic behaviour within the context of the dispute? Inherent to this task, we are also interested in exploring what is the bearing of the several dimensions of strategy in that behaviour, how they interconnect, and lastly, what are their geostrategic and geopolitical implications.

We will answer these questions with the objective of: providing a brief overview of what is at stake, particularly for Japan; identifying the strategic implications for the country; and analysing the transformations in its strategic predicament. To support us in our study, it is vital to make extensive use of official policy documents, quantitative resources, as well as specialised literature in the field of strategic studies and foreign policy to provide us with the theoretical tools necessary for explaining the dispute from a strategic lens.

This paper will be divided into four parts. Firstly, we will make some introductory comments on the strategic relevance of this dispute for both Japan and China. This will be accomplished by highlighting several dimensions, by way of a contextualisation. Secondly, we will analyse the nature of Japan's presence in the waters and skies surrounding the disputed islands, in its military-strategic dimension. Subsequently, we will refer to the dispute's geographic referents as key elements in Japan's ability to think and act strategically. Fourthly, we will finish by presenting some grand-strategic options for the years ahead.

The Dispute in Strategic Perspective

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute can be approached from several analytical dimensions, which help us consider it in proper context. In fact, combinations of these dimensions can be found in the overwhelming majority of studies on the issue, although a robust body of knowledge on its strategic contours is still lacking. Colin Gray (2009: 4-6) identified seven such dimensions. We will tackle them in turn.

Historically, the dispute began in the late 1960s with the discovery of oil and natural gas reserves by a geological survey of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. Countries in the region immediately took notice, including China, Taiwan and Japan. At the time, the Ryukyu Islands were under the control of the United States, along with the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, but as control reverted to Japanese hands in 1971, sovereignty was questioned by its neighbours. The implications of this legal structure between Japanese and American authorities, however, is severely criticised by Chinese and Taiwanese

officials (Ming, 2012; Hara, 2011). Indeed, there is little agreement as to the true significance and implications of any of the legal documents invoked by the concerned parties.

Following the Sino-Japanese normalisation talks of 1972 and peace negotiations of 1978, anxieties concerning the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would be soothed through carefully coordinated diplomacy. As Michael Green (2001: 85) points out: "During his visit to Japan in 1978, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping announced that the territorial issue should be put off for the future so that Tokyo and Beijing could focus on jointly developing the islands' resources based on the spirit of the new Japan-China Friendship Treaty. This formula for depoliticizing the Senkaku issue held for over a decade."

Despite the best intentions, real events cast a shadow over diplomacy. As Nakaniishi (2011: 130) recalls, "opposition to a peace treaty grew when, in April 1978, 100 mainland Chinese fishing vessels gathered off the Senkaku Islands in a show of sovereignty." Japanese leaders stood in waiting and clashes were avoided at sea. The political compromise thus decided to set history and sovereignty of the islands aside by favouring economics (Hasegawa and Kazuhiko, 2008: 44-7; Nakanishi, 2011; Green, 2001: 77-109).

Fast forwarding in time, the dispute suffered its most dramatic turn in September 2012, when the Japanese government's decided to nationalise three of the islands. This decision followed former-Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro's attempt to purchase the islands from its private owner by the metropolitan government, resorting to public donations, a decision backed by many of the right-wing politicians. To retain control over domestic activities and avoid angering China with unwarranted domestic politicking, former Prime-Minister Noda Yoshihiko's government decided to intervene in order to avoid further escalation. Needless to say, this provoked an immediate row with China, and tensions have spiked since. Economically though, the islands have little to no value in themselves. With less than 7km², they cannot provide the conditions for long-term human settlement. Why then risk deterioration of bilateral relations at a time of accelerated economic interdependence? After all, the United Nations survey's findings of mineral resources under the seabed, although certainly creating some expectations on both sides, were not definitive.

For these expectations to materialise into interests, we would have to look at the dispositions contained in the United States Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Parts V and VI of the treaty, signed in 1982, regulated matters pertaining to Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and Continental Shelves of signatory states. Their impact to the dispute could not have been greater. They opened the possibility of states claiming privileged economic rights not just over the fish stocks within the EEZ, but more importantly perhaps, of mineral

and energy resources located in the seabed and subsoil until a total distance of 350nm from the baseline. Suddenly, the calculated reserves on the East China Sea could be tapped by resource-hungry countries like Japan and China, and competition ensued.

Nonetheless, Manning (2013) believes Chinese calculations of existing reserves are overly inflated, both in the East and South China Sea, where it also has several ongoing disputes with neighbouring countries. The same author says: "Chinese estimates of oil and gas reserves in both disputed areas appear exaggerated compared with those of major multinational energy firms and other analysts. China estimates East China Sea reserves at 160 billion barrels of oil nearly double that of US Energy Information Agency estimates". To circumvent legal definitions and exploit the resources, the Chinese have attempted to negotiate joint-development of gas and oil resources, although Japan has always refused for believing it would weaken its sovereign integrity.

Socially and culturally, that is to say, on issues regarding societal values, norms and identity in both countries, this dispute is also provoking noteworthy dynamics. This happens because of the impact it has at the level of public and elite perceptions, where nationalism and mistrust are undisputedly rising amidst growing uncertainty. That is the opinion of Joseph Nye (2012), who recently denounced Japan's nationalist turn. "While Chinese rhetoric is overheated, there is certainly a rightward shift in mood in Japan," although as the former US Assistant Secretary of Defence acknowledges, "it would be difficult to describe it as militaristic."

Moving on to another dimension, technology could not play a greater role, especially on China's side. Returning to Manning, without recent developments in deep-sea drilling technology, the economic prospects of the area surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would not have appeared as tempting. This technology is especially relevant in oil and gas fields east of the islands, where depths can easily surpass 1500m in the Okinawa Trough. Furthermore, Chinese technological advancements are also evident in its military and constabulary forces. These forces, particularly the Maritime Surveillance Force (MSF), among a host of other organisations with maritime jurisdiction, collectively known as the Five Dragons (Goldstein, 2010), now enable China to project its presence to the islands more assertively and for longer periods of time, whereas before Japan's presence and control went virtually unchallenged.

Because this paper will deal with the three remaining dimensions, a short introduction will suffice for now. The military-strategic one pertains to the threat or use of force to achieve policy objectives, in Clausewitz's classic formulation. Here we will look at how Japan is deploying and employing its coercive means to protect its interests. Fortunately, the involvement of both countries' military forces has

been limited and generally exercised apprehensively. That is not to say, however, that this dimension is altogether irrelevant or inconsequential. Following the (in) famous Roman *dictum*, “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*”.

The penultimate dimension concerns the geopolitics and geostrategy of Japan’s involvement in the dispute. Because all political and military phenomena are geographically situated within certain confines in space, it is important to locate this dispute within the larger context of East Asian security.

Lastly, the political dimension is where policy, strategy and military force converge in the form of statecraft, thus being directly responsible for the conduct of the higher affairs of state. This is the realm of grand strategy, and will only be briefly touched upon as we dare present a few topics for future study.

The Military-Strategic Dimension

In tackling the military-strategic dimension of the dispute, we will pay special attention to two different factors which greatly influence Japan’s posture. Firstly, we will discuss threat perceptions and assessments. They constitute the representations of insecurity to an international actor, normally a state. Secondly, we will refer to the role played by coercive means in active suasion and in the preservation of strategic flexibility.

Threat Perceptions and Assessment

Unlike the territorial dispute with Russia over the Kuriles/Northern Territories (Hoppou Ryoudo), which has had a relatively minor impact in Japanese military posture after the Cold War (Hiroshi, 2008), the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has prompted major changes in Japan. It is true that a broader shift in Japanese perceptions, and subsequent assessment, of China as a *concern* to national security was already well underway. This shift was due to factors partly exogenous to the dispute itself, as we will see next. Notwithstanding, it is unquestionable that the PRC’s recent behaviour in this dispute has accelerated — if not crystallised — Japan’s perception into a *threat* of strategic importance.

The relationship with China has clearly been an issue of utmost importance in the post-war era, and so it remained in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. But while hopes were fostered toward a period of open and constructive dialogue and cooperation, despite the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, that momentum soon degenerated into frustration and then mistrust. Michael Green (2001: 78), from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, points out that first:

“Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro and Foreign Minister Hata Tsutomu began setting a new tone in the relationship in 1993 when they pressed Beijing pub-

licly for greater military transparency. [...] Then in 1996 the Taiwan Straits crisis, the reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and an emotional dispute over the Senkaku (Diaoyutai) Islands sent Sino-Japanese relations to a post-war low.”

In the aftermath of the Cold War, therefore, there existed some uncertainty in devising a new strategy to provide guidance for the *fin de siècle*. The re-emergence of China as a great power was obviously central to that uncertainty (Er, 2006). As early as 1992, the Japanese defence White Paper emphasised China’s increased naval activities, and to the surprise of many, made a direct reference to the threat presented against the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Defense Agency, 1992: 48). After these initial alarms started ringing, it soon became clear that the modernisation plans of the People’s Liberation Army (PLAN) went beyond the expected efforts to modernise existing capabilities and secure territorial defence. As Christopher Hughes (2009: 28) argued, “Japan’s concerns vis-à-vis China focus not just on its military build-up but also on signs that it is now willing to project military power beyond its borders in support of its national interests.” It is the development of this power projection capability that most attracted Japanese attention, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were located at the frontline of China’s expanding area of operations. Japan’s 2005 defence White Paper reflected this concern: “It is necessary to keep paying attention to these modernization trends and to carefully evaluate whether the modernization of China’s military forces exceeds the level necessary for its national defense” (Defense Agency, 2005: 13).

But if uncertainty about Chinese regional power prevailed, Japan’s place in Asia and the world remained relatively unchanged, as did its strategic predicament. Kyoto University professor Masataka Kosaka’s (1965) classic book *The Vision of Japan as a Maritime Nation* constitutes a fundamental document synthesising the sources of Japanese national power. Masataka’s thesis epitomised a long-standing tradition (Kitaoka, 2003: 225-40), based on the understanding that peace, stability, freedom of navigation, free trade and an alliance with another major maritime power to contain a potential continental hegemon dictate the grand strategy of a country like Japan. The emergence of a continental hegemon willing to challenge this international order was hence a fundamental threat to Japan. Although different strategic visions emerged throughout the post-war period, the immutable predicament dominated (Mochizuki, 1983/4: 152-79).

The connections between this strategic predicament with the rise of China could not be more obvious, as they affect Japan in very tangible ways. Returning to Hughes, “Japan is aware that China could disrupt sea lanes with only a small blue-water surface, submarine and amphibious naval capacity and through the assertion of its territorial claims in the East China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets.” Much is truly at stake in discussing the nature of China’s rise vis-à-vis the

place of Japan in Asia. But however salient the perceptions of a Chinese threat over the horizon, in practice, this concern only became a threat at the turn of the century.

Following China's 2004 defence White Paper, which expressed concerns over increasingly "complicated security factors in the Asia-Pacific region", Japan responded in kind. "Around the same time" Bush (2010: 20) notes, "Japan was going public with its China concerns. The report of the semi-official Council on Security and Defense Capabilities (the so-called Araki Report) noted 'security problems unique to [Japan's] location in East Asia, including a China with nuclear weapons, the possibility of armed clashes in the Taiwan Strait, and failure to resolve peacefully disputes over resource development'".

Shortly afterwards, yet a bigger shift was operated on the Japanese side as its National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG), a constitutive document in Japan's strategic debates, made direct reference to China. It stated that "China, which has a major impact on regional security, continues to modernize its nuclear forces and missile capabilities as well as its naval and air forces. China is also expanding its area of operation at sea. We will have to remain attentive to its future actions" (NDPG, 2004: 2). It also mentioned that "cross-Taiwan Strait relations remain uncertain", adding to the overall suspicion over China's strategic intentions as a rising continental power.

As suspicions accrued, Japanese official publications became more derogatory. 2009 was a watershed moment in this regard, as "the Ministry of Defense identified the invasion against the islands as one of five contingencies to which the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) have to respond" (Ueki, 2011: 141). It had become obvious that bilateral security relations had not followed a path of conciliation and cooperation. Each country now considered the other a threat, if only within a limited security scope, as trade, foreign direct investment, and other non-military dimensions continued witnessing accelerating interdependence. In short, Japan-China relations entered a phase of hot economics, cold politics (Li, 2013).

Suasion and Strategic Flexibility

As Japanese perceptions of Chinese power gave way to its assessment as a security threat, how has Japan sought to respond to it? The current deployment of coercive means envisages guaranteeing two things. First, that an adequate force presence based on a logic of suasion is in place against potential Chinese escalation. Second, that Japan preserves strategic flexibility to cope with escalation, should it inadvertently occur.

Suasion encompasses the deployment of military means to accomplish political goals. As in Luttwak's (1974) definitive study on the naval dimension of armed suasion, the strategist suggests that suasion is a term "whose own meaning use-

fully suggests the indirectness of any political application of naval force” (Luttwak, 1974: 3). In our case at hand, it shall be understood as the deployment of Japanese assets to the waters and skies surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands for the purpose of achieving a (favourable) political effect in China. For our purposes, scrambles by Air Self-Defence Force (ASDF) aircraft will be understood in their tactical support to naval forces, as Chinese violations of airspace interdictions do not represent in and of themselves a threat to Japan’s sovereignty over the islands, but rather another step in the escalation ladder (Takasawa, 2013). So how is Japan’s defensive architecture organised to achieve suasion?

From a strategic standpoint, it makes sense to divide it into five tiers. They concern the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG), the Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF), the Air Self-Defence Force (ASDF), the U.S.-Japan alliance, and intelligence-gathering. But before we start, it should be noted that this typology bears no resemblance to the various levels of strategy (Luttwak, 1987) (*i.e.* technical, tactical, operational, theatre and grand strategic), although such a study is also in order. Concomitantly, we have Japan’s coast guard as the paramilitary force at the rough edge of this dispute. In effect, it has been 11th Regional Fleet coast guard vessels, based in Naha, Okinawa, which have most prominently engaged with China’s – and Taiwan’s – many incursions into what they claim as their own territorial waters. These include civilians setting sail from such places as Taipei, Shanghai and Hong Kong, to the Maritime Surveillance Force, the Chinese government’s most active maritime constabulary agency pushing forward Beijing’s territorial claims in the East China Sea. Statistics made available by the *Sankei Shimbun* of Japan, presented in table 1, illustrate the frantic rate of JCG-MSF encounters since the decision by the Noda administration to nationalise the islands, in mid-September, until mid-December.

The first two columns on the left indicate the month and day of occurrences, respectively. The third column refers to the daily encounters between the two constabulary forces, whereas the fourth and final column indicates the sparse encounters between the JCG and one of China’s other constabulary agencies, the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command. Through constant media reporting, we can safely infer the rate of encounters has remained relatively unchanged since these statistics were last collected, on December 16.

Table 1 – Rate of encounters between JCG and MSF vessels in the territorial waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, from mid-September until mid-December 2012

尖閣諸島国有化後の 中国公船の領海侵犯			
月	日	海洋監視船	漁業監視船
9	14	6隻	
	18	3隻	
	24	2隻	2隻
10	2	4隻	
	3	3隻	
	25	4隻	
	28	4隻	
	30	4隻	
11	2	4隻	2隻
	3	1隻	
	4	4隻	
	20	4隻	
12	4	1隻	
	7	4隻	
	11	2隻	
	12	3隻	
	13	4隻	
	16		1隻

Courtesy: Sankei

The rationale behind this first-tier deployment is evident. As a constabulary force, the Japanese Coast Guard abides by different legislation and has different rules of engagement from the purely military Maritime Self-Defence Force. This key distinction has been abundantly referred to in Bush's work *The Perils of Proximity* (2010), and may well be the primary reason why clashes have not spiralled out of control. Even amidst continuous direct exposure between opposing fleets and the seldom use of water cannons and ramming tactics against Taiwanese and Chinese vessels, which were duly reciprocated, the political leadership on both sides was able to disengage and de-escalate the crisis to more amenable levels of animosity. This intensive pressure notwithstanding, the coast guard does not stand alone.

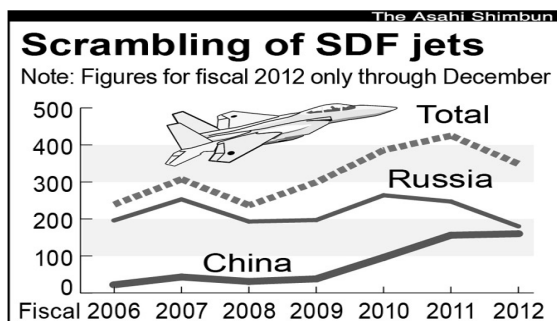
In the second tier of this architecture we find the navy proper. More secretive in its deployments and operations, the MSDF has undoubtedly contributed to deter Chinese intentions from beefing its claim with more advanced and aggressive hardware (Defense of Japan, 2012: III). The fact that the PLAN has been kept at bay reveals not only a strategic option on Beijing's behalf – one also adopted in its disputes in the South China Sea, incidentally –, but also a firm evidence of Japan's active naval suasion, of a coercive and negative type, that is, deterrent in its aims (Luttwak, 1974: 7-9, 17-38).

Besides naval suasion, there is another mechanism at play here. Given the legiti-

mate concerns about the consequences of putting Japanese naval warships with military personnel in the islands' surroundings, there is a keen sensibility toward the preservation of strategic flexibility. In other words, a clear separation of responsibilities is observed, as the MSDF steers away from direct coastal protection against, and detention and boarding of, Chinese civilian and constabulary vessels and crew. This separation of jurisdictions has thus ensured the Japanese government enough political leeway to handle each occurrence appropriately without raising disproportionate political fallout from denouncements by the Chinese government and media over treatment of its nationals. Indeed, should the MSDF be perceived as being directly involved, domestic public outcries in China, fuelled by ever-present historical memories of Japan's imperial and militaristic past, could greatly reduce the Communist Party's decision-making freedom and potentially portray the event as an act of war. As a result, the task aforementioned is left to the JCG, which has even resorted to Okinawa Prefecture law enforcement agents to handle the detention of crew members, for their allegedly softer methods. This is not an unimportant matter when many of these crews often include media reporters amongst them to ensure greater public visibility in China (and Taiwan).

The third tier corresponds to the activities of the Air Self-Defence Force. This arm of the military has recently been brought to the limelight in light of recent interceptions of Chinese aircraft over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands' air defence identification zone. As Bush correctly points out, Japan is one of few countries where this zone coincides with the EEZ, thereby vastly expanding the area of jurisdiction (Bush, 2010: 68). Consequently, a relatively high number of ASDF scrambles should not raise many eyebrows. What the following graph illustrates nonetheless, is a substantial increase in the scrambling of ASDF aircraft directed toward Chinese intrusions in recent years.

Illustration 1 – Number of ASDF scrambles for protection of airspace since 2006



Source: Asahi Shimbun

The attentive reader will not fail to notice the existing mismatch between Russian and Chinese incursions in the airspace surrounding the Japanese islands. In this regard, judging by the numbers alone, one would be inclined to regard Russia as a much bigger threat than China. What is unfolding instead is a combination of a Russian air force fleet being much larger than China's, and "the testing Japan's capabilities to defend its claims to the island chain [Kuriles/Northern Territories]" (Mastro and Stokes, 2011: 15). Russo-Japanese relations aside, what is noteworthy is the rapid increase of Chinese incursions at the same time that political tensions rise in bilateral relations. This nexus cannot be overstated. It is precisely this correlation between material developments and subjective assessments that has put Japanese authorities on the alert.

Below is another illustration of Chinese activities over Japanese airspace, particularly over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (orange lines at the lower left corner of the map). The table on the left displays a greater data range, showing in quantitative terms the not insignificant increase of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) incursions resulting the scrambling of ASDF aircraft to intercept, from 2002 (Heisei 14) until 2011 (Heisei 23). It is relevant to add that the number of ASDF scrambles against Chinese aircraft between October (following nationalisation) and December 2012 alone was 91, more than half of what had been registered between January and October (Yomiuri, 2013). The issue has become so pressing that talks have been started within the Ministry of Defence to transfer an ASDF air wing to the Sakishima Islands, south of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This decision, experts believe, would halve the time between lift off and engagement, as previously Chinese aircraft could evade interception before Japanese fighter jets reached the scene (Yomiuri, 2013).

The fourth tier is represented by the U.S.-Japan alliance and it functions as a decisive element in Japan's deterrent strategy, provided Washington demonstrates the political will to protect its ally in its claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu - a topic which still ignites fierce discussions (Ueki, 2011). If this mechanism works, then stability is ensured as the probabilities of China becoming militarily involved in a conflict against Japan and the United States in a context of nuclear and conventional inferiority are drastically reduced.

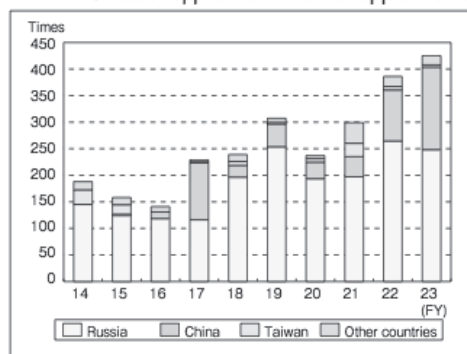
Lastly, the fifth tier addresses intelligence-gathering activities. They cover all sectors, from HUMINT (Bush, 2010: VII) to SIGINT (Takasawa, 2013; Mainichi, 2013) and have suffered a major overhaul in recent years. These activities assist policymakers make better judgements when assessing and acting upon unfolding events. No detailed accounts of their activities and success exists open to the public eye.

Illustration 2 – Activities in the air space surrounding the Japanese islands,
in numerical and graphic representation

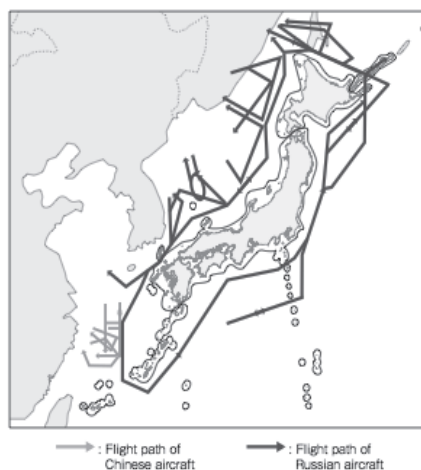
● **Ensuring Security of Sea and Airspace
Surrounding Japan**

✓ **Number of scrambles and its % breakdown
by target country and region**

◆ Russia: approx. 58% China: approx. 37%



✓ **Example of Flight Patterns of Russian
and Chinese Aircraft Against Which Scrambles
Were Directed**



Source: Defense of Japan (2012: 177)

To sum up, this defensive architecture provides for an intricate system of partially overlapping tiers, working to guarantee Japanese retention of initiative in suasion to prevent unnecessary escalation, and a great degree of strategic flexibility in controlling escalation should it occur.

The Geopolitics and Geostrategy of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute

In scholarly accounts of the dispute under consideration, there is an evident disregard for the overlapping layers of geographic significance. These layers reflect an overall assessment by Japanese and Chinese authorities regarding the geo-strategic interplay at hand, pertaining to matters beyond the limited geographical confines of the islands themselves. As we will argue, these layers are vital to the understanding of both countries' views toward the dispute, for they connect to elements of overall greater strategic importance.

This frequent disregard for geography is not particular to analyses on this dispute. Gray (2010: 78) posits that: "Geography, geopolitics, and geostrategy have long been out of favour by Western scholars of international relations and strategic studies", which perhaps explains this analytical short sightedness. Fortunately, that is not so much the case for Japanese analysts.

Gray (1991) clarifies the importance of this dimension. The strategist (2010: 78) claims that “strategy must always have geographical, and hence geopolitical and geostrategic, referents. Strategy is designed from the standpoint of particular geopolitical and geostrategic interests. As a general rule, it is composed on behalf of geopolitical units whose societies are encultured as products of histories that have been shaped critically by geography.” Those geography-based interests and histories are essential to a true appreciation of the stakes involved in this confrontation.

Not surprisingly, for Japan this is more than a dispute over a group of islands in the vicinity of Okinawa and Taiwan. In this regard, we have identified five geographic referents at play here.

China’s First Island Chain

China’s so-called Island Chain strategy, or Offshore Active Defence, refers to an unclear number of formulations of China’s territorial integrity and maritime interests as postulated in a theoretical framework for national security. Opinions diverge over its rightful doctrinal author, with analysts arguably converging around former PLAN. Admiral Liu Huaqing, Mao Zedong, Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao (Bennett, 2010: 128-129). Historically, China’s naval arm was of limited strategic importance, although this modernisation promises to revert decades of maritime malpractice and lay the groundworks for a strong navy (Ministry of National Defence, 2008: V).

The aforementioned strategy is divided into three operational areas, and two island chains, spreading from the Chinese coast outwards. The first encompasses the Yellow, East and South China Seas, limited only by the Korean Peninsula, Japan’s westernmost islands including the Ryukyu, and as far south as today’s contested waters north of Malaysia. The second island chain extends farther into the Western Pacific, reaching from the main island of Honshu, Japan, to the U.S. territory of Guam, and New Guinea. The third operational area corresponds to the remaining global maritime commons, although some analysts argue it may consist of another island chain extending to Hawaii, in the Central Pacific, or instead to the Indian ocean (Holmes, 2011; Jha, 2010).

These formulations, notwithstanding some critics, including former commander of the MSDF, V.Adm (ret.) Koda Yoji (2010), question the existence, never mind the utility, of this strategic conception. As it stands, these chains attest to a concentric delineation of defensive perimeters which Beijing might perceive as contested or hostile in operational planning. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are clearly located within the first island chain, which has Taiwan at its heart. Gaining access to these islands, therefore, acquires a new geostrategic meaning amidst expanding Chinese military capabilities. As Watanabe (2011) suggests, the “largest of the Senkaku Is-

lands, Uotsurijima, would be extremely valuable as a base for ballistic, anti-ship, and anti-aircraft missiles.”

Other analysts have also indicated the potential value of the islands to Beijing’s submarine flotillas. As all of China’s neighbouring waters appear vulnerable to the United States’ forward-presence power-projection capabilities, a naval strategy based upon carrier battle groups as centrepieces of American sea power, it stands as a logical objective for the People’s Liberation Army Navy to seek to establish an area free of foreign interference. Following this rationale, Kawamura, former commander of the MSDF’s antisubmarine air wing, boldly claims that: “No option is left (for China) except for trying to make the South China Sea a safe haven and defending submarines carrying nuclear missiles there” (Yoshida, 2012). There are several aspects requiring further analysis, such as terrain conditions and underwater cartography, but theoretically the Senkaku/Diaoyu could become a privileged base, less than 200km away from Taiwan, to operate Chinese submarines. Bush (2010: 19) also mentions the threat from submarines, as they now make regular visits around Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zones in its westernmost islands.

A Military Confrontation over Taiwan

Closely interrelated with the previous geographic referent is a military confrontation over Taiwan between Chinese forces on one side, and Taiwanese, American and potentially Japanese forces on the other. The aforementioned Araki Report first established the linkage between the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and the “Taiwan issue”, indicating a Japanese commitment to aid an American intervention in Taiwan. According to Bush (2010: 20), the Araki Report focused on “security problems unique to (Japan’s) location in East Asia, including a China with nuclear weapons, the possibility of armed clashes in the Taiwan Strait, and failure to resolve peacefully disputes over resource development [allusion to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute].”

Cross-strait relations are thus extremely important to regional security from a Japanese standpoint, especially in light of Chinese territorial ambitions in the East China Sea. Furthermore, should any military contingency arise over Taiwan requiring the participation of the United States, the bulk of human and material resources would be sent from bases in Okinawa and elsewhere in Japan, as mentioned in the fourth geographic referent. The geographical proximity of Okinawa to Taiwan would surely rank high amongst Beijing’s threat assessments. Depending on the nature of the contingency, therefore, Chinese armed forces could militarily contest possession of the disputed islands. This would be in line with its historical interpretations of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands being part of Taiwan, and with a geostrategic imperative to serve as an important foot-

hold to stage military operations to secure unimpeded access to Taiwan against Okinawa-based forces (Berteau *et al*, 2012: 13-15, 40).

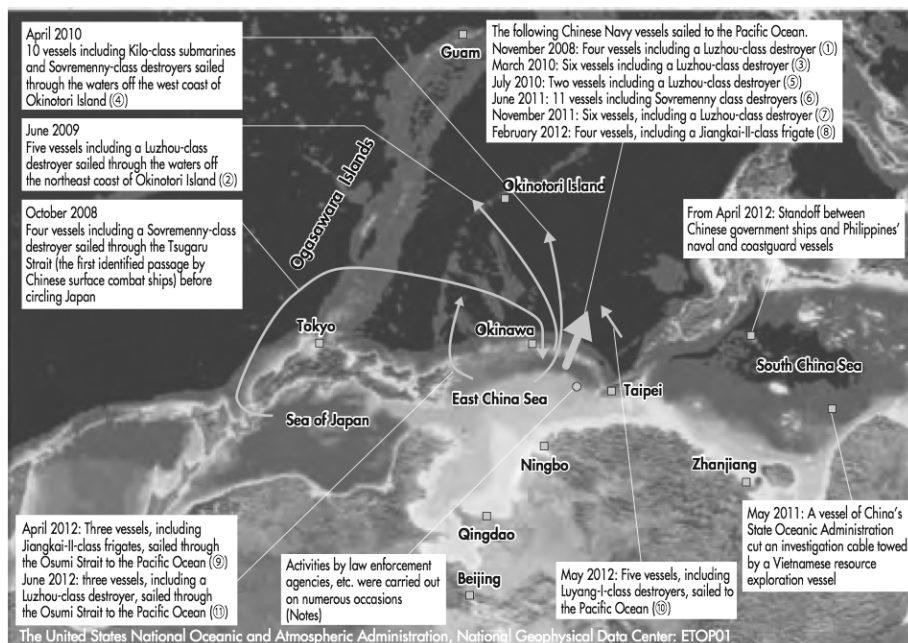
Strategic Breakout to the Pacific: the Ishigaki and Miyako Straits

The third geographic referent in this dispute pertains to China's access to the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean. As existing frontiers presently dictate, the PLAN, much like the Soviet navy of old, is mostly locked from an open, unguarded access where to operate its growing blue-water navy capabilities. Miyako Strait, adjacent to the Japanese island of the same name, is an international passage where an entry into the Pacific can be made, but it stands close to American and Japanese intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) stations in neighbouring islands. The same applies to Ishigaki Island and all of Japan's southwestern approaches. As illustration 3 demonstrates, this geography dictates a reality whereby American and Japanese naval assets can curtail China's expanding capabilities and restrict them to the confines of its surrounding waters.

Alternatively, China could opt to navigate northeastwardly and follow through the Tsugaru Strait, an international passage in the Northern Territories/Kuriles, as it once did in 2008 (much to Japan's surprise). This option, however, constitutes a much longer route and could arguably entail as many chances of being detected as sailing directly eastward through the Miyako Strait.

If PLAN warships are not to be confined to the relatively shallow waters of the Yellow and East China Seas until the Okinawa Through, acquiring easier access to the Pacific Ocean is a strategic priority. These ambitions notwithstanding, there have been criticisms of its ships not being at sea as frequently as required by a strong navy it aims to be, raising questions about the PLA Navy's ability to initiate and sustain deployments efficiently and away from its shores for long periods of time (Holmes, 2013). Certainly the geographical disposition of Japanese defence systems for its farthest islands and the U.S. Navy's forward presence add to the bottleneck effect played by Japanese islands in restricting PLAN's operations (Berteau *et al*, 2012: 13-16). Conversely, should China gain access to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, exploring their geographic proximity to the Miyako/Ishigaki Straits for its submarine flotillas could make geostrategic sense for advanced deployments in the Western Pacific (or second island chain).

Illustration 3 – Advancements to the Pacific Ocean by Chinese naval vessels



Source: Defense of Japan (2012: 38)

U.S. Forward Presence and Bases in Japan

The fourth referent concerns US military bases in Okinawa, where the majority of United States Forces Japan (USFJ) personnel and the III Marine Expeditionary Unit, with 18.000 troops, are quartered. Despite the recent troops drawdown in Okinawa and the initiation of revision talks for America's force posture in Pacific Command (Berteau *et al*, 2012), Japan, according to a Pentagon-commissioned report by C.S.I.S., "is the lynchpin for U.S. access and influence in the Asia Pacific region" (*Ibid.*: 23-26). Its importance can only be accentuated by the so-called "Asia Pivot", whereby Washington made promises to commit more resources and attention to this increasingly important region of the globe (Clinton, 2011).

Thus far, the only public references to a Chinese threat to US forces in Okinawa were made in the context of a Taiwan contingency (Bush, 2005; 2010). To Japan, this has only favoured its intentions to further integrate America's defence strategy through the advancement of the U.S.-Japan alliance (Nye and Armitage, 2012). Nonetheless, a new variable has recently been brought to bear by a senior PLA officer. Speaking to the *Global Times* newspaper, a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, Major General Jin Yinan openly questioned Japan's sovereign-

ty over the Ryukyu Islands, including Okinawa (Hille, 2012). Comprehensively, Takahashi (2010), an analyst at Jane's Defence Weekly, argued that "[m]ore than a few Chinese scholars are beginning to claim Okinawa as Chinese land by writing numerous academic papers in Chinese journals, though they are still in a minority among historians."

While the strategic implications of such claims in terms of a Chinese attack against Okinawa may remain in the realm of conjecture and war planning, the political fallout of such revisionist statements can only contribute to deteriorate the already fragile state of Sino-Japanese relations and galvanise US opinion in Japan's favour.

Although not publicly disclosed, it is safe to speculate about the existence of war plans in both Japan and the United States, including studies on joint operations, on the military implications to SDF and USFJ troops in Okinawa, in the event of a Chinese hostile takeover of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Matake, 2009). In fact, Ueki (2011: 141) pointedly drew the line between these two metaphorical dots. "The additional forces provided by the United States through the alliance", the former China specialist and contributor to Japan's defence White Paper argues, "would obviously make a Chinese attack on the Senkaku islands more difficult. The United States has fighter jets in Okinawa and one carrier battle group home ported in Japan." Ueki then concludes by stating that "[t]he possibility of escalation that involves the United States forces a more complicated war plan on China. The fear of an inadvertent escalation, including the possible use of nuclear weapons, deters even a limited use of force." Should that happen, Okinawa would stand on the frontline of military contingencies and represent the geographic "aircraft carrier" from which to launch operations.

Japan's Lifeline: Sea Lines of Communication

Lastly, for a maritime nation such as Japan, any disruption to its vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) would entail an existential threat to its very prosperity and subsistence (Yamaguchi, 2012: 81-103; Patalano, 2012: 219-237; Graham, 2005).

Grand-Strategic Options

It is at the highest level of grand strategy that all these dimensions intersect. The historical, economic, social and cultural, technological, military-strategic, geopolitical and geostrategic, and political dimensions hence redouble the challenges to the formulation of a coherent policy. Concordantly, the question over which Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute policy should Japan follow simply begs another, much larger, question: which China-policy ought Japan pursue? This is one of the quintessential questions of modern Japanese foreign policy and admittedly the opinions vary greatly (Togo, Rozman and Ferguson, 2007; Samuels, 2007).

It is uncertain which current in Japanese policy and intellectual circles will prevail and most decisively shape foreign and security policy, for one must discount the power of leadership in carving out new policies. In this sense, following Abe's recent return to power, many analysts are already expecting the new Prime-Minister to bring a distinctive personal trait into Japanese foreign policy (Yokota and Miller, 2013). His long record of public statements, speeches and publications, most notably his book (2006) entitled *Utsukushii Kuni-e* (Toward a Beautiful Country) foreshadow an intellectual blueprint of some of the influence Abe is expected to exercise in policy-making. This is particularly relevant in the context of a Cabinet Office with increasing powers in Japanese politics, and hence not as restrained by institutional and other mechanisms as other administrations in the past (Bush, 2010: VI-VII; Estévez-Abe, 2006).

So what influence is Abe expected to have? As the grandson of former Prime-Minister Kishi Nobusuke, and son of former Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro, his is a vision profoundly imbued by conservatism. According to Levidis (2012): "the key to this return was Abe's ability to articulate a vision of conservative and statist rejuvenation of Japan, defence of the social order and a willingness not to shrink from advocating a hardline approach to China and the preservation of Japanese sovereignty." Consequently, his view is nothing short of a sweeping transformation of Japanese society as it currently stands. Nonetheless, doubts persist regarding the impact of the failures during the first administration will have. Continuing with Levidis, Abe "failed to bring about revision of the post war constitution; he failed to alter the role of the Emperor and imperial family; he failed to comprehensively reform the institutions of national security; he failed to enhance Japanese leadership in Asia; he failed to continue the structural economic reforms of the Koizumi cabinet; and he failed to insist on reform of the Liberal Democratic Party". Can he thus gear the necessary changes to substantially affect Japan's China policy?

Abe has returned to office with a new impetus, apparently wanting to offset the rather negative public perception which brought down his administration in 2007. The first major development has been an announcement of a vision toward an Asian security diamond. In an op-ed published in late December 2012, he voiced his concerns over Chinese intentions to transform the East and South China Sea into "Lake Beijing", denoting a keen awareness of the strategic challenges imposed by China's rise (Abe, 2012; Nabeshima, 2012). Against this and other destabilising forces in the region, including North Korea, threats to the global commons, among others, Abe proposed the creation of a quadrilateral security framework bringing together Japan, the United States, India and Australia (Kaneda, 2013; Medcalf, 2013; Hirabayashi, 2011). Should this initiative come to fruition, it would signal a robust step in the creation of an Asian security architecture, the promotion of

global governance and the balancing against a rising hegemonic power in the continent, *i.e.* China (Medcalf, 2013).

Alongside these transformations in Japan's strategic debates and leadership, other factors are likely to influence the outcome of this Sino-Japanese dispute. They could be tersely presented following Thucydides' classic trinity of *fear*, *interest* and *honour* for their interplay pervades whatever course of action Japan will eventually follow in its dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Here are but a few of the factors where that interplay introduces a substantive amount of uncertainty into strategic assessments.

First, Japan's immovable commitment to maintain territorial sovereignty is a key factor that can override all other rational-based policies. These are volatile times in East Asian politics and the confluence of elite perceptions with popular opinion might direct actors to interact in often unexpected ways. The operational level of strategy is, in this regard, of utmost importance as Bush (2010) correctly concluded. Given the potential for miscalculation and miscommunication, actors at the sharp edge of the dispute (*i.e.* out in the sea) may provoke an unforeseen escalation that neither government will be able to contain.

Second, Japan's commitment to strengthen the US-Japan alliance remains a founding pillar of its foreign and security policy. Therefore Tokyo must remain acutely attentive to Washington's moves in its policy toward the middle kingdom, as the relationship between the United States and China will inexorably have an important impact in Tokyo's China-policy.

Third, Japan is equally committed to pursue economic recovery after the "two lost decades", and the devastation resulting from the earthquake and tsunami disasters of March 2011. China plays a major role in this strategy, as the upward trend in bilateral trade has demonstrated, despite souring political relations. This said, the moderating effect of economic interdependence in the dispute remains unknown.

Fourth, we must also acknowledge ongoing steps to remove, or at least relax, Japan's anti-militarist constraints. These steps toward militarisation have greatly benefited from China's own military modernisation and uncertain strategic interests (Hughes, 2009) though they are not exhausted by that single threat. U.S. pressure to take on a great role in international security, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programs, the fight against terrorism and organised crime, among others, are forces accruing to erode many of the constitutional, legal and political limitations to the full integration of military power in foreign policy formulation. The speed and scope of this erosion will have a direct bearing on the management of the dispute.

Fifth, we must consider Japan's ambitions to extend its diplomatic outreach to countries in Southeast Asia, and recently through the strengthening of security ties. Accordingly, China's territorial disputes in the South China Sea will positive-

ly affect regional perceptions of Chinese interests and position in the balance of power, perhaps to Japan's advantage. Growing fears of Chinese assertiveness and revisionism may be drawing countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines closer to Japan, in a typical mechanism of external balancing.

Ultimately, and despite the focus of this paper, the best answer may not be military in nature. Keeping diplomatic channels open is fundamental. Negotiating informal agreements, away from the public eye, is also recommendable, and some steps have been taken in this direction. As Wallace (2012) highlights, "during the CCP's crucial Beidaihe summer retreat, a consensus decision was made to use non-military tools to 'resolve' the territorial issue." These are reassuring signs, and should be further promoted. In this sense, the creation of the communication mechanism between the defence authorities, agreed upon by Wen Jiabao during his trip to Japan in 2007, should be pursued immediately and made extensive use of, to complement other channels for communication between senior officials on both sides (JFIR, 2012).

It may simply be that this dispute cannot be resolved. Instead, management within acceptable risks may be the best it can be reasonably achieved.

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